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Liberals, Where Were You When They Fired Sullivan?

By Charles Peters

I'VE BEEN WAITING for six months for my fellow liberal journalists to speak up in defense of David Sullivan. If you're saying "David who?", it's not your fault, it's theirs. Sullivan was fired late last year by the CIA for giving information to Richard Perle, a top assistant to Sen. Henry Jackson. The reason the liberals haven't spoken up is that Perle is a superhawk and the information was useful to the anti-SALT forces. Liberals have been screaming for years about the need for Congress to inform itself about the CIA. A great liberal hero, Ernest Fitzgerald, was fired for giving information to the Congress. But that was anti-hawk information, exposing the cost overruns on the C5A.

If liberals want the Fitzgeralds protected, can't they see that the Sullivans must be protected too? Senators and congressmen and CIA and Defense Department employees all work for the United States. We must remember that principle first, and we must help them remember it. Loyalty to one's own agency that keeps one from telling important truths about it to other agencies is one of the great problems of the United States government. When I worked in the executive branch, I felt it was my duty to tell the truth within the agency; I felt an equal duty to conceal the truth — when it made the agency look bad — from Congress and from its investigative arm, the General Accounting Office. I didn't begin to see how wrong I was until I left the government, founded The Washington Monthly, and started to look at the government from a citizen's instead of an insider's perspective. But my attitude while in the government was a common one, and it remains common today. That is why it is so important for liberals to wake up to the significance of the Sullivan case. You may not like Perle or the cause served by Sullivan's information. But the precedent that a government official can freely transmit information to congressmen and their staffs is crucial to open government.

EXCERPT

Charles Peters is editor of The Washington Monthly, from which this Outlook column is adapted.